

Clifford Ross

William Willis

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Washington, D.C.

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Clifford Ross William Willis

Exhibition organized and text written by
John Beardsley, Adjunct Curator.

On the face of it, this exhibition has a simple curatorial premise. It presents the recent work of two painters of substantial accomplishment, one from New York, one from Washington, both of whom are showing for the first time in any depth in a Washington, D.C., museum. William Willis is admittedly no stranger to followers of contemporary art in this city, having received solo exhibitions in commercial galleries here as well as at the city's premier alternative space, the Washington Project for the Arts, in 1985. But apart from a show at the Grand Rapids Art Museum in 1987 and a traveling group exhibition the same year organized by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art to honor the recipients of the sixth Awards in the Visual Arts—of which Willis was one—this is his first concentrated museum exposure. Clifford Ross has shown several times in solo exhibitions at commercial galleries in New York and elsewhere, but has not yet received museum exposure in this country.

There is much beneath this superficial premise, however. The two artists are superficially quite distinct, inasmuch as Ross paints the landscape, while Willis draws his images from a study of natural forms or the texts of Eastern religions. Nevertheless, there are many points of comparison. Both artists are exemplary of the resurgence of interest in overtly representational subject matter among artists of recent years, after several decades in which abstract art predominated. Like the best of the new painters with whom they can be associated, their aim is to reveal as much as they can through the depiction and transmutation of observed subject matter, viewing it both as a formal problem and as a way of expressing emotional and even spiritual concerns. This drive to link the observed and the ineffable sets them apart from the purely abstract artists on the one hand, and the literally depictive, or "realist," ones on the other.

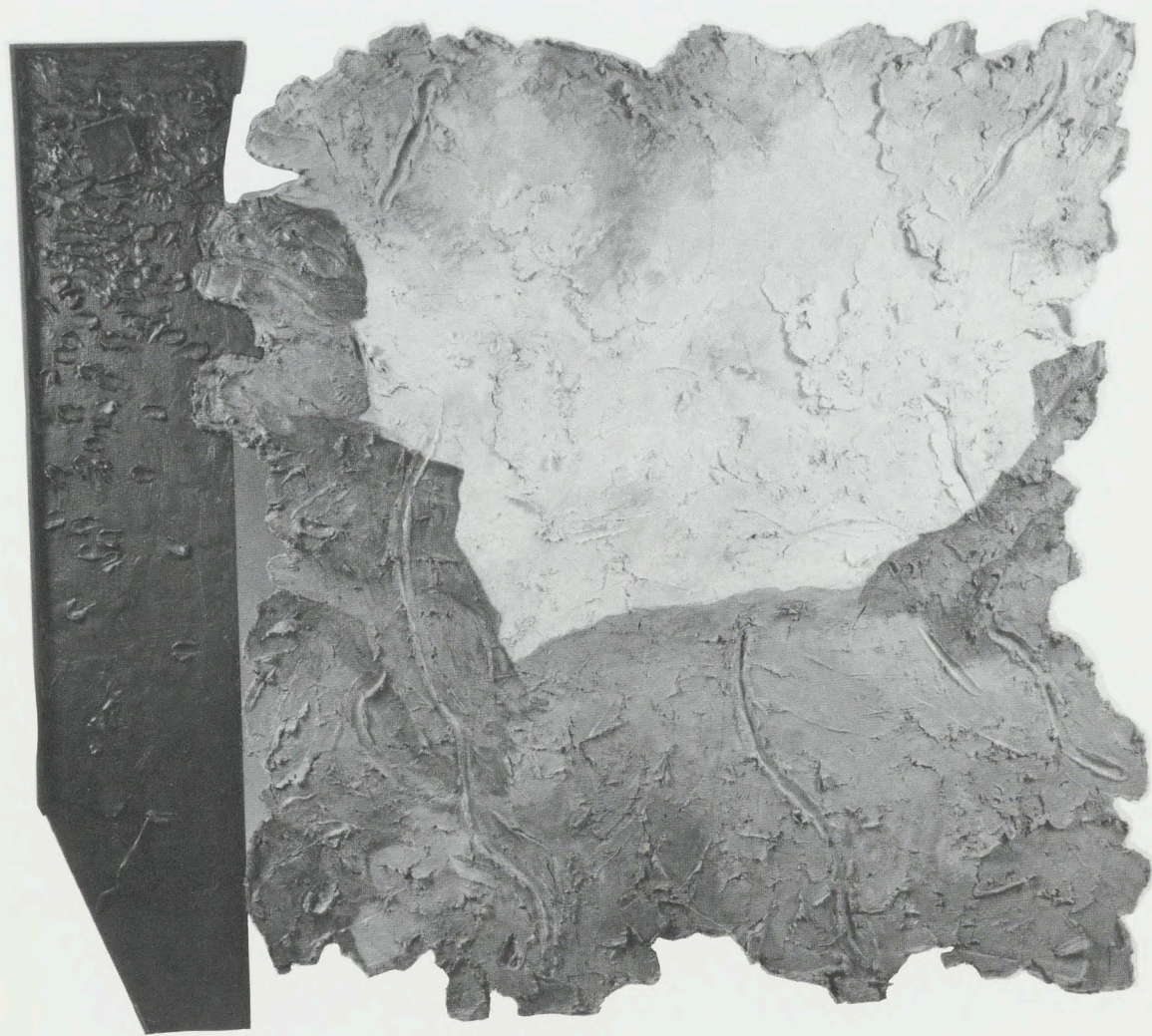
Those who have seen Clifford Ross's work before will be surprised by the paintings in this show, for it was as an abstract, color-field painter that Ross was first exhibited. From the time of his Yale graduation in 1974 until the end of the decade, his painting grew directly out of his experience of other art, especially that of the generation that came to prominence in the sixties: Olitski and Frankenthaler, for example. Around 1980, Ross began to work back toward the landscape—at first in a highly allusive way, but soon in a more literal one. By 1981-82, he was painting landscapes from nature and studying life drawing and sculpture at the National Academy of Design in New York. These interests merged for a time in 1983-84, when Ross executed a series of landscape paintings with bronze or lead figure sculptures attached to their surfaces.

In 1985, Ross began working with papier mâché, a development that would lead to the works in this exhibition. At first, the papier mâché was cast into bronze and then painted; in 1986, the papier mâché was itself painted. The gestation of this working method was slow, and Ross even interrupted it at points to take on other, unrelated kinds of work. But by early 1987, Ross had attained the technical and artistic confidence to work on a commanding scale, and rapidly. All the paintings in this exhibition were executed in the last twelve months.

The odyssey that led Ross from abstract painting to the depiction of landscape has both autobiographical and art historical causes. Ross was born and grew up in New York City and enjoyed frequent exposure to art and artists. In combination with his education, this gave him at an early age a level of aesthetic sophistication that led

directly to his experiments with color-field painting. After his departure from Yale, Ross began work on an anthology of writings by and about the abstract expressionists that is now nearing publication. Among the insights he gained through this work was one especially pertinent to his own painting: these artists had not based their mature abstract styles primarily on the example of other abstract art—as he had—but had worked through a succession of other styles, many even beginning with a landscape or figure, and distilling their abstractions from there. Ross decided he, too, ought to start from the beginning and emulate not the results of the process but the process itself. Whether or not the process will lead Ross back to abstract painting again is an open question.

Ross has been guided in his rediscovery of the landscape by his interest in the sublime, a term in use since the mid-eighteenth century to describe the capacity of the landscape or of art to evoke feelings of awe, or even terror. Paradoxically, perhaps, he encountered this aesthetic notion first in its most recent, rather than its original, application. In the early 1960s, the art historian Robert Rosenblum began discussing the work of the abstract expressionists in terms of the abstract sublime, suggesting the links between contemporary American painting and the Northern European romantic tradition (see, for example, his essay in *Art News*, February 1961). Through an exposure to this discussion a decade or so later, Ross came ultimately to know the grand eighteenth and nineteenth-century landscape paintings that aspired to the sublime—including James Ward's *Gordale Scar*, which hangs in London's Tate Gallery.

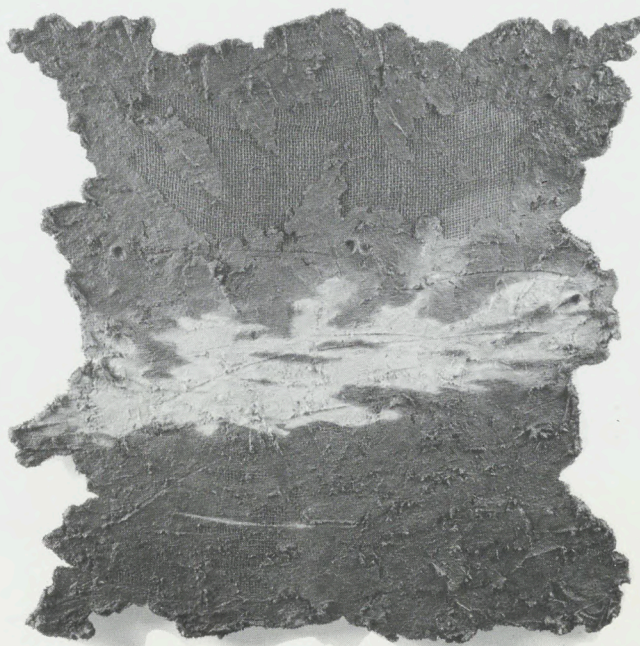


Clifford Ross
Gordale, 1987
oil, papier mâché and mixed media on panel
95" × 108"

Ward's painting, executed in the second decade of the nineteenth century, depicts a deep gorge in the uplands of Yorkshire. It is composed in such a way as to emphasize the awe-inspiring character of the site: towering cliffs virtually shut out the sky and dwarf everything before them, including the spectator. Ward's painting is the inspiration for Ross's *Gordale*, but less for its precise subject than for its scale and expressive intent. Ross simplifies the scene and reverses the vantage point, but retains the feelings of monumentality and vertigo. And while Ward's painting is an illusory space we are invited to enter—in the manner of most landscape painting before our own century—Ross contradicts the illusion of depth in his *Gordale* by appending the black, abstract element to the left side of the painting, which serves to remind us that the painting, in the modernist idiom, is also an object that occupies our space.

None of Ross's other paintings employ this kind of device, but all balance on that same point at which they are both literal objects and receptacles for spatial illusion. The papier mâché surfaces, built forward into our spaces and given elaborate contours, emphasizes the materiality of the paintings, while the depicted images recede into space. At times, surface and image work together—the diagonal lines gouged into the surface of *The Mustard Field*, for example, emphasize the illusion of depth. More often, they are held in tense equilibrium. This reflects the two-stage manner in which these paintings are made. In the first, burlap or steel mesh is attached to the wood or metal support and the papier mâché is applied to it by hand and with a trowel. Ross does this quickly, creating the whole surface of a painting in a single four-to-eight-hour period and leaving many traces of the working method—especially finger and palm prints. The support is then saw-cut to correspond to the outlines of the papier mâché, and the surface is sealed with acrylic to prepare it for painting. At this point, Ross begins the second stage, creating the landscape image in oil.

Gordale, as a kind of transitional work, is the only one of these paintings that draws its overt subject from previous painting. The others depict landscapes that Ross has seen—*The Mustard Field* and *Les Baux* (a hill town in Provence) in France, *Dark Landscape* in Wales, others in Maine and on Long Island. One senses that with *Gordale*, Ross was reaching for the means to express what he experienced in these landscapes: a sense of exhilaration, of being "glad to the brink of fear," as Emerson described his revelations in *Nature* (1836). Having attained the means, Ross went on to apply it to his own subjects, and in his own manner. Turbid skies, chromatic and compositional complexity, and vertiginous vantage points—peering over a precipice in *Les Baux* and straight into the sky in *Black Sunset*—underscore the fact that these landscapes are both aesthetic exercises and evocations of emotionally-charged episodes.



Clifford Ross
Black Sunset, 1987
 oil and papier mâché on panel
 35½" × 36"

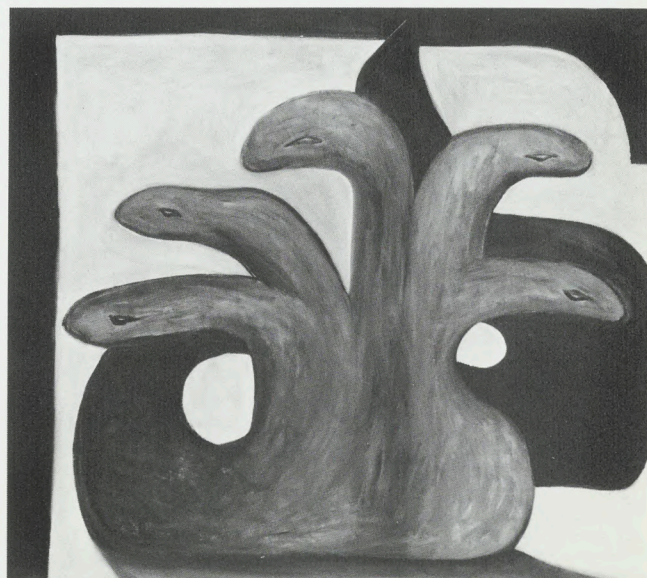


Clifford Ross
Les Baux, 1987
oil and papier mâché on panel
96" x 96"

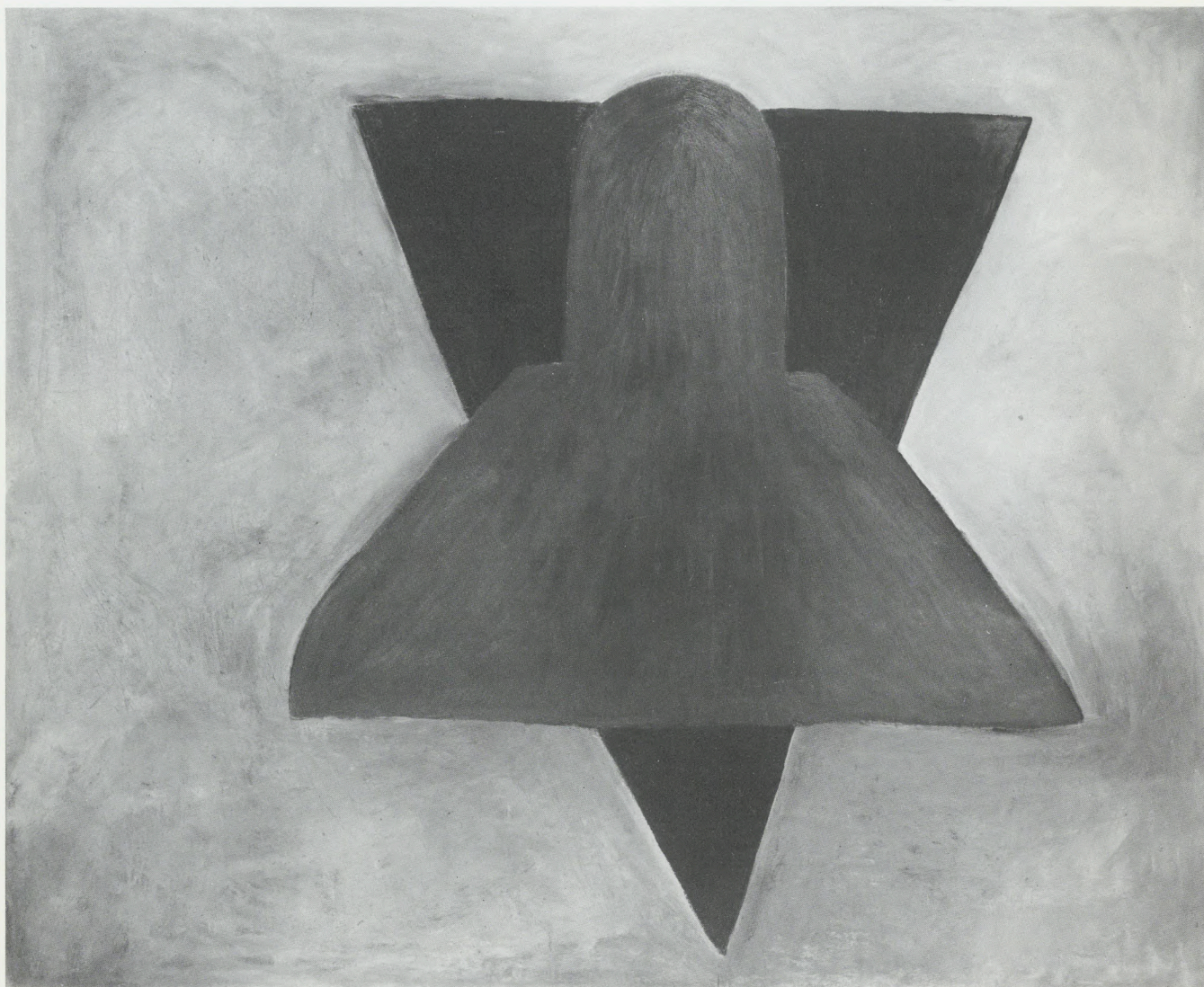
The same duality of intent characterizes the paintings of William Willis. They most apparently explore the effects of painting itself—of color, shape, and texture. They are painted slowly, with shape built upon shape, color upon color. The earlier shapes and colors are often virtually obscured by the later ones, remaining only as pentimenti or as flecks of subsurface color. Some areas are richly textured; others are ground down with a circular sander, which creates its own patterns and reveals the chromatic layers. Moreover, the pigments are mixed with different amounts of oil, so that some achieve a matte finish while others attain a rich luster. These reflective surfaces seem to project from the paintings, while the matte areas recede. Although Willis's forms tend to be rather flat, this difference in finish combines with chromatic shifts to create quite complex spatial illusions. Indeed, Willis's paintings may be said to balance on that same point as Ross's, being both objects in themselves occupying our space, and representations of things within depicted space.

Willis's extended working method suggests that the creation of these superficially simple images is in fact rather arduous. This is confirmed in the case of one painting by its title, *Avadhoota*, which refers to those eccentric Indian ascetics who stubbornly follow their own consciences regardless of opprobrium (generated especially by begging and wandering naked in public). In this instance, the term is an expression of the painting's intractability: it went through several versions before Willis was finally satisfied with the result.

The title refers not only to the creative process, however, but to the meaning of the image as well. Willis is deeply interested in Indian religious thought and has read many of its primary texts. He has also read a great deal about Indian art—especially the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, who did so much to make Indian art comprehensible to the western audience. In *Avadhoota*, Willis combines in his own way two of the primary symbols of Indian religion and art: the triangular yoni, emblem of the feminine, and the upright lingam, emblem of Shiva and of the masculine force generally. Together they symbolize the creative force—shakti—that is perceived to unify all life. In *Ananta* and *Kundalini Shakti Surrounding the Invisible Lingam*, Willis utilizes another of the emblems of shakti: the serpent.



William Willis
Ananta, 1987
 oil on canvas
 42 × 48"



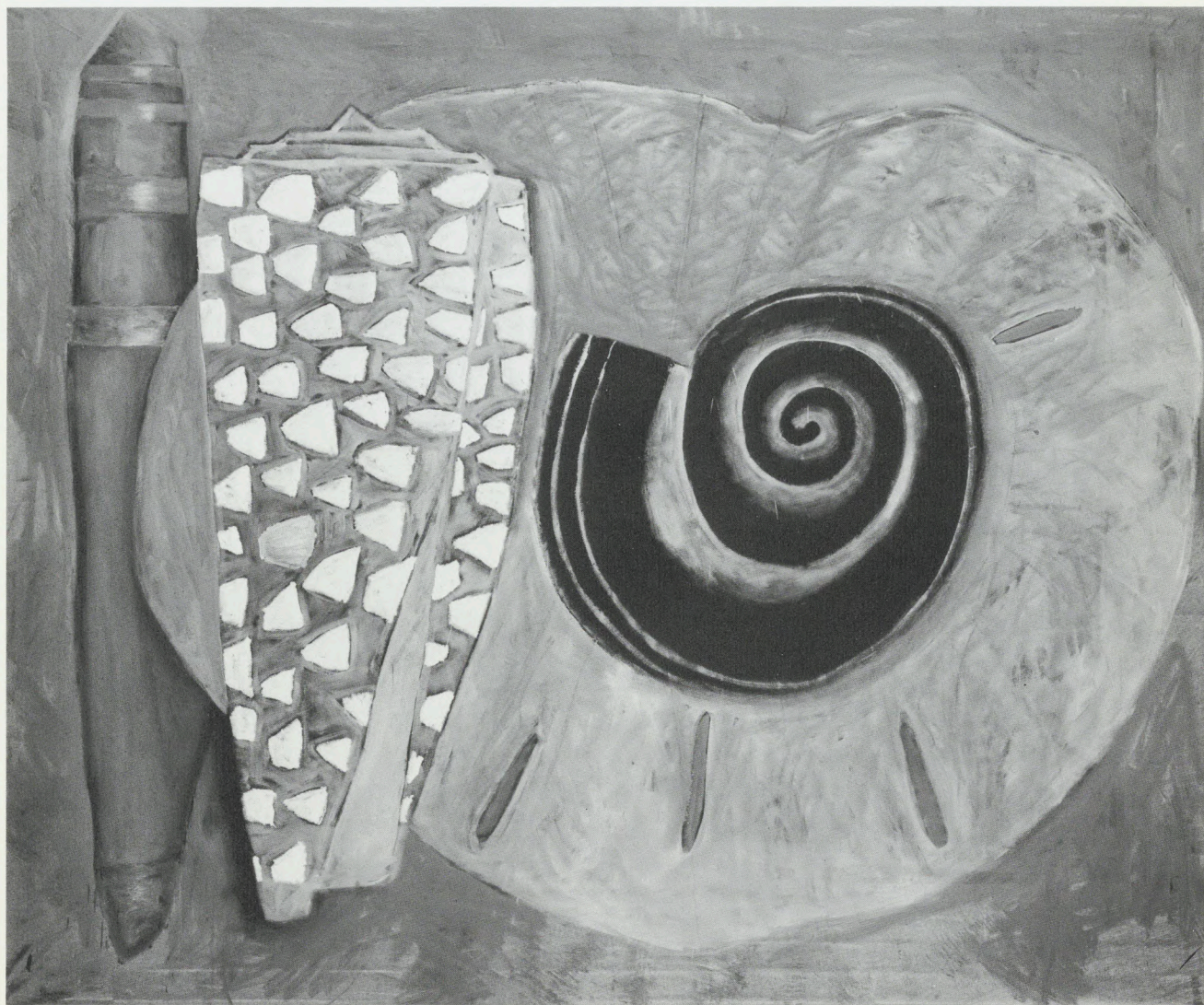
William Willis
Untitled (Avadhoota), 1985-87
oil on canvas
84½" × 103"

The notion of creative energy relates these paintings to the apparently dissimilar ones based on images from nature, such as *The Garden*, *Lock and Key*, and *Untitled*, a depiction of two simplified tree forms. *Lock and Key*, for example, might seem to be simply a representation of shells. But if we think beyond the representation and ask how the shells are formed, we are led into a consideration of a process that again alludes to a unifying creative force. The title suggests that we are trapped in the materiality of things unless we use them as keys to understand some higher, ineffable energy. While Willis took Indian thought as his point of departure into a contemplation of the nonmaterial world, he is close to the spirit of American Transcendentalism in this painting—especially to Thoreau, who also perceived nature as an emanation of the divine spirit and who, in *Walden*, could see in a thawing sandbank in spring the outward expression of a process that related animals, plants, and the earth to each other.

Like Ross, Willis came to his present painting after exploring the possibilities of abstract art: his works in the 1970s were geometric abstractions much like those of Dorothea Rockburne. Willis also made himself innocent of contemporary art, reaching back to find something more appropriate to his personal ambitions. In his case, there was less to slough: Willis was born in Sheffield, Alabama—far from the centers of contemporary art—and spent much of his youth in Tampa, where he moved with his mother to join her family after the death of his father. He attended the University of South Florida in Tampa, originally with the idea of studying engineering. Slowly he gravitated to art, inspired in part, he remembers, by a traveling exhibition of paintings from the Roby Foundation that came to the

university when he was there. He received a B.A. in 1968 and, after a stint in the navy, an M.F.A. in 1973. He describes 1979 as a kind of *annus mirabilis* for him, for that was when he first began to investigate his spiritual inclinations and to become aware of the renewed role of representation. As for many others, the late work of Philip Guston was important to him in confirming his developing interests.

In the effort to reconcile observed subject matter with emotional experience and spiritual conviction, Willis and Ross ally themselves with the best of this decade's painting, which has sought to recover rich depictive and allusive possibilities in answer to the purely formal concerns that—rightly or wrongly—are widely perceived to have been the sole characteristic of late-modernist painting. Like many of their contemporaries, therefore, they are engaged in a dialogue with the past. But they are not copying previous styles merely for decorative effect, like so many of the so-called post-modernists—they are using styles and images from the past fully aware of the meaning they carried then and with the conviction that they are still pertinent to us today. Nor are they engaging in the wholesale appropriation of the past merely to critique it—there is none of the irony to their paintings that is the particular affliction of so much art today. Rather, they—like the best of their peers—are suggesting that one can be historically aware and still pursue an individual and implicitly original way of painting. While Ross and Willis do not encompass all the many things that painting can be, they give fair measure of its continued possibilities.



William Willis
Lock and Key, 1985
oil on canvas
84½" × 101½"

Selected Exhibitions and Awards

Clifford Ross

Born 1952.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York (1976, 78); William Edward O'Reilly, Inc., New York (1977); Byck Gallery, Louisville, Kentucky (1979, 81); Watson/de Nagy Gallery, Houston, Texas (1979); Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc. at William Edward O'Reilly Inc., New York (1980); Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York (1984).

Selected Group Exhibitions

"Artists Salute Skowhegan" Kennedy Galleries, New York (1977); "Five Painters" Acquavella Gallery, New York (1978); Exhibition of Award Winners, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York (1978); "Figurative Sculpting" The Institute for Art & Urban Resources, PSI, New York (1981); Annual Exhibition, National Academy of Design (1984); "12 in New York" Yale School of Art, New Haven, Connecticut (1986); "Big/Little Sculpture" Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts (1988).

Selected Awards

A. Conger Goodyear Fine Arts Award, Yale University (1974); Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Award, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1978); Helen Foster Barnett Prize for Sculpture, National Academy of Design (1984).

William Willis

Born 1943.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C. (1977, 79); Jack Rasmussen Gallery, Washington, D.C. (1981); Bernard Jacobson Gallery, New York (1981); I. Irving Feldman Galleries, Southfield, Michigan (1982); Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C. (1985); Baumgartner Galleries, Washington, D.C. (1986, 87); Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, Michigan (1987); Rosa Esman Gallery, New York (1987).

Selected Group Exhibitions

"Washington Painters" Art Gallery, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey (1976); "Biennial Exhibition" Baltimore Museum of Art (1983); "The Washington Show" Corcoran Gallery of Art (1985); "10 Washington D.C. Painters" Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina (1986); "Awards in the Visual Arts 6" Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University and tour (1987).

Selected Awards

National Endowment for the Arts, Individual Artists Fellowship (1980); Awards in the Visual Arts 6 (1987); Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, (1987).

Works in the Exhibition

Clifford Ross

Black Sunset, 1987
oil and papier mâché on panel
35½" × 36"

Boothbay, 1987
oil and papier mâché on panel
36" × 35½"

Cloud Study, 1987
oil and papier mâché on panel
35½" × 34½"

Dark Landscape (Wales), 1987
oil and papier mâché on panel
96" × 95½"

Gordale, 1987
oil, papier mâché and mixed media on panel
95" × 108"

Les Baux, 1987
oil and papier mâché on panel
96" × 96"

The Mustard Field, 1987
oil and papier mâché on panel
96" × 94"

Sky Cathedral, 1988
oil and papier mâché on panel
96" × 96"

All paintings are courtesy of the artist.

William Willis

Monument to Substance (Saturn), 1982
oil on canvas
68" × 75½"

Lock and Key, 1985
oil on canvas
84½" × 101½"

The Garden, 1985-87
oil on canvas
86" × 62½"

Untitled (Avadhoota), 1985-87
oil on canvas
84½" × 103"

Ananta, 1987
oil on canvas
42 × 48"

Kundalini Shakti Surrounding the Invisible Lingam, 1987
oil on canvas
54" × 54"

Untitled, 1987
oil on canvas
76" × 87"

All paintings are courtesy of the artist; Baumgartner Galleries, Washington, D.C.; and Rosa Esman Gallery, New York.

Photographs of Willis paintings by Mark Gulezian/
Quicksilver.